An Awkward Venus: The Moon in Imagist Poetry

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A curious obsession with the moon can be observed in the poetry of the English modernists, especially those early Imagist poems which represent the first serious attempt in the language to break away from the Romantic tradition. T. E. Hulme's "Autumn," reputedly the very first and certainly the most famous Imagist poem, appeared in 1909. In the same year Edward Storer published his "Image" which, says F. S. Flint, was the first poem of the first collection of verses by an Imagist poet[1] and which, according to John Isaacs, was probably also the first poem to be titled "Image."[2] Interestingly enough, both these "firsts" were about the moon. Other poets of the group such as Flint himself, Richard Aldington, Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell were also much attracted by this subject and wrote excellent pieces about it. What was it that caused this sudden revival of interest in an image apparently worn out and made stale by centuries of overwork?

The Imagist poets, first led by Hulme and later by Pound, were united by their revolt against Romanticism or, more exactly, the vague emotionalism and diffuse sentimentality of the later nineteenth century manner. The first two of the well-known "four cardinal principles" of "imagisme," as dictated by Ezra Pound, run as follows:

1) Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.

2) To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to presentation.[3]

The first of these can be summarized as a call for concreteness and clarity and the second for condensation. About the latter, Pound says in his *ABC of Reading* that "great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree"[4] and that poetry is "the most concentrated form of verbal expression."[5] As for the former he cites the case of Chinese ideograms. "In Europe," he says, "if you ask a man to define anything, his definition always moves away from the simple things that he knows perfectly well, it recedes into an unknown region, that is a region of remoter

and progressively remoter abstraction." The Chinese characters, on the other hand, are "abbreviated pictures" used "AS pictures"[6]: that is to say, unlike the alphabet, which merely represents verbal sounds, those characters either evoke a concrete thing through a descriptive picture or an abstract condition through a combination of such basic pictures.

Here, of course, Pound grossly oversimplifies the matter. His view is based on Ernest Fenollosa's notes and, as James J. Y. Liu points out, "the Fenollosa approach is, to say the least, seriously misleading."[7] And yet its impact on Pound's own and the other Imagists' poetic theory is immense. Like Chinese characters, as Richard Aldington maintains, "poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities."[8] Hence the importance attached to the "image" which "presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."[9] In his edition of Fenollosa's *The Chinese Character as a Medium for Poetry,* Pound has significantly chosen as the first full-scale illustration of this point a Chinese poem about the moon, which he paraphrases (with some obvious errors) as follows:

> The moon's snow falls on the plum tree;
> Its boughs are full of bright stars.
> We can admire the bright turning disc;
> The garden high above there, casts its pearls to our weeds.[10]

In Pound's view, since each character is composed of pictographic elements, the whole poem is made out of small pictures meticulously arranged to convey certain complex situations and feelings. He particularly emphasizes the fact that, in a "poem of moonlight, the sun-element [meaning the ideogram representing the sun] is contained five times: once in three lines, and thrice in the second."[11] Pound's analysis of characters, by overemphasizing their pictorial nature, does not correspond to the way that a Chinese poet or reader would appreciate them. Yet, although he was mistaken, such an interpretation fits very well into Pound's own evolving system of poetics.

The chief aim of the Imagists was to dissipate the dim aura of tenuous sensations and vague emotions enveloping the works of the previous half century, which had lost all the freshness and depth of insight of Romanticism at the height of its vigour. Their recipe for this was the clear-cut image: the accurate representation of the "thing" itself, without any discursive comments or sentimental effusions about it.

The moon, therefore, initially attracted the Imagists, not by being congenial to their sensibility, but as the easiest and worthiest target for their attack. The moon, after all, with its rich connotations and emotional associations, had been a romantic image par excellence. A somewhat parallel situation can be found in the East-Asian literary tradition. As François Cheng points out, the moon was "one of the most fundamental symbols of the classical Chinese poems," the autumn moon suggesting, among other things, "distant presence and desire for reunion (separated lovers may reunite in the act of watching the same moon.)"[12] Tu Fu's "Moonlit Night" and Li Po's "Thoughts of a Quiet Night" are some of the greatest poems written in this vein. The moon also stands for some ideal state of purity, chastity or tranquillity impossible for one to attain.

In the case of classical Japan, according to Ikeda Kikan, the moon symbolized above all the spirit of "mono-no-aware," a deep poignancy for the infinitely delicate and gracious aspects of human life and things of nature. "People soothed their griefs by looking at the moon; they recalled the olden days and thought of distant places, and so could find in the moonlight a world totally free from the bounds of time and space."[13] The moon was in fact one of the three essential nature images in Japan, the other two being snow and flowers (i.e. cherry blossoms.) The Imagist Richard Aldington shows his awareness of this fact by writing in his "Living Sepulchres":

> One frosty night when the guns were still
> I leaned against the trench
> Making for myself hokku
> Of the moon and flowers and of the snow. (. . .)[14]

For the most part, however, the moon image in Japan shared most of its romantic associations with the Chinese moon. The Japanese borrowed from China the legends of the man in the moon who was fated to hack the bay-tree for ever, of Ch'ang O who stole an elixir of life from her husband and ascended to the moon, and of the moon-rabbit (it seems that the older image of moon-frog did not appeal much to the Japanese imagination). These legendary stories were appropriated by many generations of romantic poets and became fixed in the classic idiom, so that everyone knew the proper images to express the appropriate sentiments. Something of the sort can surely be said of the English moon with due alteration of

details: the myth of Ch'ang O, for example, could be replaced by that of the chaste Diana.

Hulme's "Autumn" reads:

> A touch of cold in the Autumn night –
> I walked abroad,
> And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
> Like a red-faced farmer.
> I did not stop to speak, but nodded,
> And round about were the wistful stars
> With white faces like town children.[15]

Although there is no explanation, no indication of the kind of feeling that this particular situation gave the narrator, the fine contrast between the full moon likened to the pink healthy-looking face of the farmer and the stars seen as pale town children effectively conveys the "feel" of an early autumn night when a touch of chill is felt through the lingering summer heat. But that is not all. The most powerful contrast in this poem, which gives us the true shock of recognition, is the implicit one between the conventional romantic image of the full moon, pale-white, aloof, high up in the sky, and the actual moon barely above the horizon, big, red, and familiar, or even vulgar. The clear-cut, down-to-earth image of the latter deflates, even mocks the stereotyped image of the cold and noble moon.

It can be seen from this example that images in the typical Imagist poem do not work exactly the way Pound says they do. They alone do not realize Pound's "instant fusion of intellect and emotion" because their vague emotional associations, which were supposed to have been totally expunged from their poems, actually play an essential role. The above poem, for example, owes a large part of its effect to our awareness of the commonplace notions of the moon. Hulme, in his efforts to banish old associations, has nevertheless relied heavily on those very associations.

Ultimately, what Imagist poets like Hulme aimed at was "pure" poetry as opposed to "versified prose," i.e. poems diluted by story-telling, philosophizing, or moralizing. To this purpose, the Imagists were constantly guided by the examples of French Symbolist poetry, Japanese *haiku*, and classical Chinese poems, especially those of the T'ang dynasty. Although at first glance this might seem a strange assortment of utterly dissimilar examples, they do in fact have one thing in common – their keen desire to

change and thereby revitalize a long-standing poetic tradition collapsing under the weight of its own accretion.

The 17-syllable *haiku*, for example, followed one thousand years of domination by the 31-syllable *waka* with all its rigid conventions concerning permissible diction, suitable subjects and even their proper metaphorical meanings. The *haiku* revitalized the poetic tradition by introducing elements of vulgarity and familiarity in its diction and imagery while retaining the suggestiveness of certain poetic words, especially those associated with the four seasons. T'ang poetry emerged after the Chinese literary scene had been monopolized since the Han dynasty by the *fu* (賦), a rhymed prose form with highly formalized rhythm and vocabulary. The situation was somewhat different for the French Symbolists. Yet their whole project, as Paul Valéry points out, can be characterized as a reaction against Victor Hugo, whose enormous works in themselves represented the phases of French Romanticism from hopeful and struggling youth to drawn-out and unoriginal senility.

Likewise, the Imagists were in revolt against the prolonged twilight of Romanticism in the latter half of the 19th century, which had lost all the freshness of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. Nevertheless, they drew sustenance from the fertile waters of this "stagnant" tradition, thereby undermining their stated belief that everything depended on the so-called "*direct* treatment of the thing," meaning an "absolute accurate presentation and no verbiage,"[16] as Flint puts it. Too intent on creating, or concocting, a novel image, they did not fully realize how heavily they owed its "instant" effect to the very thing they despised, that is, the vague aura of feelings and thoughts traditionally associated with it. They seem to have forgotten the fact that, in literature, images can no longer exist in a void than words and phrases can. Hulme's "Autumn," for example, casts a contemptuous glance at the romantic image of the moon but, in so doing, relies not a little on the stereotype. It's the reader's thwarted expectation that leads him to the true point of the poem; without such a foil, the poem would turn out to be just a shallow piece of witticism.

Another Imagist poem with a somewhat similar structure to "Autumn," although more complicated, is Richard Aldington's "Evening":

The chimneys, rank on rank,
Cut the clear sky;
The moon,

With a rag of gauze about her loins
Poses among them, an awkward Venus –

And here am I looking wantonly at her
Over the kitchen sink.[17]

Here, the implicit object of denigration – or, more precisely, the high-blown image to be denigrated – is that of the moon as personified by the goddess Diana. Diana's legendary chastity is tarnished when she is linked to Venus, the goddess of beauty and love; yet, as both figures are taken from myth, the terms of comparison are charged with conventional and highly romantic overtones. In order to sharpen the contrast and complete the process of demystification, therefore, the poet goes on to further degrade the image of Venus by metamorphosing her into the charming but vulgar figure of a cheap wanton. This new identity puts her in tune with the background of the industrial city, evoked by the chimney image. It can be seen here that, far from being treated as mere pictures of "things as they are," the two goddesses are presented as reworkings of old and familiar clichés.

In our third example, Hulme's "Above the Dock," the distant moon is literally pulled down to earth.

Above the quiet dock in mid night,
Tangled in the tall mast's corded height,
Hangs the moon. What seemed so far away
Is but a child's balloon, forgotten after play.[18]

Here, all highflown romantic ideas about the moon are minimized and vulgarized by comparing it to a child's balloon. Nevertheless, the poem's impact has been lessened because it is too explicit. "What seemed so far away/Is but. . ." is a formulaic phrase which could be used in many Imagist poems and *haiku*, yet it would invariably weaken the verse by "telling" instead of "showing" – the challenge is to convey the sense of surprise without directly mentioning it.

Another poet who tried pulling the moon down to the earthly realm was Yamazaki Sokan, a famous proponent of *haiku* in its earliest and crudest stage.

If a handle were stuck to the moon

It would be a fine round fan.

Although this may sound like a childish fancy (and it *is* childish, all right) it should be noted that the poet has made a deliberate distortion and vulgarization of the Chinese poetic convention, widely known in Japan, which likens the full moon to a pure white silken fan. The poem which established this connection, and to which Sokan is indirectly referring, was penned by Lady Pan, a court lady loved by Emperor Chen of the Han dynasty. When she lost his favor to a young mistress, she sent him a silver screen inscribed with the following poem (in H. A. Giles's translation):

> O fair white silk, fresh from the weaver's loom,
> Clear as the frost, bright as the winter snow –
> See! friendship fashions out of thee a fan,
> Round as the round moon shines in heaven above,
> At home, abroad, a close companion thou,
> Stirring at every move the grateful gale.
> And yet I fear, ah me! that autumn chills,
> Cooling the dying summer's torrid rage,
> Will see thee laid neglected on the shelf,
> All thought of bygone days, like them bygone.[19]

Here she compares herself to a round fan made of snow-white silk which looks exactly like the full moon. This fan affectionately cools its master during the hot summer months, but is cast aside and forgotten when the cool breezes begin to blow.

This brings us to our final examples. Ezra Pound's "Fan-Piece, for Her Imperial Lord" was apparently written before he got hold of Fenollosa's notes:

> O fan of white silk,
> clear as frost on the grass-blade,
> You also are laid aside.[20]

This is a translation of Lady Pan's poem, – a *very* free translation. Actually what Pound did was to condense the ten florid lines of iambic pentameter in Giles's 1898 version quoted above into sixteen mostly monosyllabic words. Giles's translation was crafted in typically late-Romantic manner, embellished here and there with such stale set phrases as "fresh from the

weaver's loom," "bright as the winter snow," "ah me!," the alliterative "grateful gale," and so forth. By the time Pound had chopped off this excess, the moon image itself was gone, which is no wonder since the line it appears in – "Round as the round moon shines in heaven above" – is the tritest of all. Even had Pound read the Chinese original, however, I believe he would have found it too wordy and dependent on clichés in the typical manner of Han poetry. In other words it can be said that Pound did to a Victorian-style translation just what a T'ang poet, with his taste for precision and conciseness, would have done to Lady Pan's original!

It is not surprising, therefore, given the evolution of Chinese poetry, that Pound was far more satisfied with a T'ang verse like "The Jewel-Stairs' Grievance," composed by Li Po:

> The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,
> It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
> And I let down the crystal curtain
> And watch the moon through the clear autumn.[21]

As far as Pound was concerned, this was a perfect example of *his* kind of poem: the extreme condensation of the phrases, charged with meaning to the utmost degree, and the objective and precise presentation of the "things" themselves, free of explanatory comment and sentimental effusion, pleased him so much he was content with an almost literal translation. Although the title is awkward in English, for example, Pound left it as it is to convey as faithfully as possible the direct impact of the three images, which are linked by no functional words like "as", "of", etc. that would dilute the poetic intensity. Actually he says he never found any occidental who could "make much" of the poem at one reading, but he holds that "by a sort of mathematical process of reduction" anyone could follow the rigid thread of logic underlying the succession of concrete images. In other words, such a poem is like a well-written mystery story: "You can play Conan Doyle if you like"[22] – a fact underlined by the interesting note he appended to the piece.[23]

Here again, however, Pound confuses the "thing itself" and the secondary meaning invested in that image in a particular culture. How could anyone without elementary knowledge of Chinese poetry, or lacking a competent guide such as Fenollosa, infer the full meaning of this delicate poem from those twenty innocent-looking ideograms? Any reader ignorant

of the poetic genre of court-ladies' complaints would be unable to arrive at a correct or even feasible interpretation of the work since, in fact, nothing is told of the narrator's feelings as she gazes at the moon.

Nevertheless, the Imagists believed that all that mattered was, first, the precise representation of the "thing," and, second, the right choice of things to be combined in the poem. So they tried to find ever fresher combinations of images fit for their modern sensibilities. Because they lacked a fully mature, or rather *over*mature poetic tradition such as those of the T'ang dynasty and of premodern Japan, however, it was extremely hard for them to find clusters of naked images which could ring true. That is why, I think, the Imagist movement was so short-lived, despite the tremendous significance of its principles.

Conrad Aiken, the well-known American critic, once deftly caricatured the Imagists' desperate hunt for novel images, especially their remarkable predilection for the moon image in the following poem, entitled "Ballade of Worshippers of the Image":

Ezra Pound, Dick Aldington,
    Fletcher and Flint and sweet H. D.,
Whether you chirp in Kensington
    Or Hampstead Heath, or Bloomsbury;
Birds of Protean pedigree,
    Vorticist, Cubist, or Imagist,
Where in a score of years will you be,
    And the delicate succubae you kissed?

You, of the trivial straining fun,
    Who ape your betters in mirthless glee;
You, who's meticulous clear lines run
    In hideous insipidity;
And you, forsooth, who shinned a tree
    To keep with the gaping moon your tryst,
Where in a score of years will you be,
    And the delicate succubae you kissed?

Idols and images, every one,
    Crash down like ancient theory;
Where is the Vortex under the sun
    That spins not always emptily?

Cease these jeers at minstrelsy,
You, who perish and are not missed,
For where in a score of years will you be,
And the delicate succubae you kissed?

L'Envoi
Pound, though your henchmen now agree
To hail the Prince in the Anarchist,
Where in a score of years will you be,
And the pale pink dream blown mouths you kissed?[24]

Notes

1. F. S. Flint, "The History of Imagism," in Cyrena N. Pondrom, *The Road from Paris: French Influence on English Poetry 1900-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 300.
2. J. Isaacs, *The Background of Modern Poetry* (E. P. Dutton, 1952), p. 35.
3. Flint, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
4. Ezra Pound, "How to Read," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound,* ed. by T. S. Eliot (Faber, 1960. First published 1954), p. 23.
5. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (Faber, 1961. First published 1951), p. 36.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
7. James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (The University of Chicago Press, 1983. First published 1962), p. 3.
8. Richard Aldington, "Preface to *Some Imagist Poets, 1915*," in John Press, *A Map of Modern English Verse* (Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 43.
9. Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 4.
10. Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. by Ezra Pound (City Lights Books, n. d.), p. 36.
11. *Ibid.*
12. François Cheng, *Chinese Poetic Writing*, trans. by Donald A. Riggs and Jerome P. Seaton (Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 93.
13. Ikeda Kikan, *Heian-Jidai no Bungaku to Seikatsu* [Literature and Life in the Heian Period] (Shibundo, 1981), p. 323.
14. Peter Jones (ed.), *Imagist Poetry* (Penguin Books, 1972), p. 57.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
16. Flint, *op. cit.*, p. 301.
17. *Imagist Poetry*, p. 58.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
19. K. K. Ruthven, *A Guide to Ezra Pound's Personae (1926)* (University of California Press, 1969), pp. 68-69.
20. Ezra Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems* (Faber and Faber, Second edition 1968), p. 118.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
22. Ezra Pound, "Chinese Poetry," *To-Day*, April 1918, p. 56, cited in Peter Brooker, *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 139.

23. Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems*, p. 142: "Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach."
24. *Imagist Poetry*, pp. 150-151.